

Christ: God's Answer to the Problem of Evil



Thrust Statement: The Eternal God speaks His last word to humanity through Christ.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

The world reeks with evil. One cannot read the newspapers or listen to television without bombardment of the atrocities committed by nations or individuals. Names such as Herod the Great, Nero, Bloody Mary I (a Catholic queen in a protestant country), Ivan the Terrible, Josep Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot, Idi Amin (Muslim)^[1], Kim Sung Il (north Korea's Stalin), Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein (Muslim), Uday Hussein (Muslim), and Zarqawi (Muslim) are identified as "evil" personified. In addition to these leaders, one also recalls the names of individuals who represent evil in its most chilling form: Al Capone (St Valentine's Day Massacre), John Gotti, Ted Bundy (killed a many as thirty-six girls in four states), Jeffrey Dahmer (killed at least sixteen), Bonny Parker and Clyde Barrow, and Jim Jones. President Bush spoke of certain nations as the axis of evil. Why does not God intervene and stop such evil? If God is all-powerful, why does God allow such atrocities?

There is not an easy solution to the above questions. Perhaps, the answers lie in life, not logic. It is life that speaks the language of truth in the world of humanity. The Christian finds his or her answers in the knowledge of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus the Son of God. Christ is God's answer to the problem of evil. Is God all-powerful? God's omnipotence (power or control) is at the heart of this question. The question of God's omnipotence lies at the forefront of the question of good and evil. Is God omnipotent? If so, can He not stop evil? First, the question of omnipotence does not imply power to establish illogically what shall be possible. In other words, God cannot do what is absurd, or illogical. God cannot make a false statement true. He cannot make virtue a vice or a circle a square. He cannot cause anything to exist and not to exist at the same time. He cannot destroy Himself. Omnipotence cannot mean the ability to bring

about a contradiction. It can only mean the capacity to do what is consistent with God's nature and perfection.

Evil in God's World

Why does God not get rid of evil? If God stepped in and eliminated evil, He would have to rework the entire nature of men and women; they would then be robots, no longer human. What is possible in the world of sin and grace depends on what God is. Eternal truth is not prior to God; truth is the very nature of God. God has a character. God entered time and is known for what He is and what He does in history. God is "I am that I am." When one speaks of existence, one can say that to exist is to be this and not that, even for the God of all creation. For one to be able to defy God is a far greater proof of God's omnipotence than a perfect robot, which could only act in blind obedience. It is the power to withhold obedience to God that makes one's obedience worthwhile. If one can only act in blind obedience, then freedoms of will ceases to exist and one simply becomes a machine. Freedom to choose is proof of God's love. God in His omnipotence treats His creatures, not as puppets on a string, but as persons.

One is ever conscious that there is gigantic power of evil in this universe. God deals with evil in the Incarnation. Christians can overcome evil with Good. God deals with evil through Christ. It is in the Cross that God speaks His last word to men and women. Not only is the Cross essential to God's dealing with evil, but also the Resurrection of Jesus. The religion of Islam denies both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospel of God to a dying world, a world of evil. The Resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith; it is the Christian faith. The Resurrection is not an event that is attached to the end of the story in order to create a happy ending. The Resurrection is from the foundation of the world. These events constitute the Gospel. The crucifixion and Resurrection go together. Paul writes to the Corinthians about the very heart of the Gospel as God's means of salvation:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^a: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (**1 Corinthians 15:1-4**).

God's Answer to the Problem of Evil: Jesus Christ

The religions of the world do not accept this Gospel, which includes Muslims. Islam denies the Gospel of God. Muslims teach salvation through works, not God's grace. The only hope for humanity and peace is the acceptance of the One who is the Prince of Peace. God deals with evil in and through the Gospel. The Gospel is Good News for the whole world. It is Good News that God has made available a means of salvation based upon faith in the finished work of Christ, not one's meritorious works. The only way human nature will change is exposure to the Gospel of God, which introduction brings about a change in one's ethical behavior in one's daily walk with God and his neighbors. Where the principles of the True Gospel are not proclaimed, one discovers unbelievable carnage committed against people. Where the principles of True Christianity are lacking,

one sees an increase of warfare against its inhabitants. One observes this mentality of no right or wrong in the daily reporting of the news coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan concerning the murder of individuals on a daily basis. Yet, this same mentality of “no concern” for life is rampant in the United States, especially among children, as well as adults, as a result of evolutionary philosophy and a diet of atheism.

One sees ungodly behavior among the radicals of the various countries that refuse to accept Christian principles. In the United States, the prisons are teeming with thousands who rejected the Gospel of God for their lives. If nations as well as individuals would submit themselves to the Prince of Peace, one would witness love, not hate. The love of Jesus is the only thing that can root out the principles of mischief among Islamic radicals in Iraq and the extremists of Afghanistan as well as other atheistic nations. Even though Islam recognizes Jesus as one of six prophets, nevertheless, they do not adhere to the teachings of Jesus. Without Jesus, one beholds the most pernicious venom instilled into one’s society. It is only in and through Jesus that one can observe a society living in peace and love. Muslims reject both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Thus, they reject the teachings of Jesus about love. Christians must continue to share the Gospel with every world religion. Today, there are many former Muslims who have accepted Jesus as their savior.

It is not only in Iraq and Afghanistan that individuals need to know the true nature of the Gospel, but it is also needed in America. In fact, the whole world needs Jesus. It is true that this nation (America) does not oppress its people in the same way as one observes in Iraq and Afghanistan by extremists, but, at the same time, Christians practice a form of hate against other believers over doctrinal differences—differences that ought not to divide and create hate. If Christians are going to convert the world, they, themselves, must understand what the Gospel of God is. It is in this regard that Jesus prayed to the Father:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me ([John 17:20-21](#)).

Prerequisite for Evangelism: Unity Among God’s People

If Christians are to reach the masses for Christ, believers must seek to fulfill the prayer of Jesus. The word *Gospel* is tossed to and fro by many well-meaning Christians in their zeal to be true to their understanding of the teachings of God as interpreted from the written Scriptures. The word *Gospel* has almost as many definitions as there are divisions within the various Christian communities. Since the word *Gospel* is not understood by many believers, this paper seeks to uncover the true meaning as employed by the New Testament writers. One’s failure to grasp the real significance of the Gospel has resulted in multiple partitions within many Christian fellowships and a failure to reach the masses for Christ. Some Christians identify the Gospel as twenty-seven books called the New Testament. This list of classifications is almost ad infinitum. The Gospel is Good News about salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

This mistaken belief about the actual nature of the Gospel is the source of separation by many Christians, which misinterpretation about the very essence or heart of the Gospel has degenerated this once-united movement of God’s family into warring

factions and distinctive sects that refuse fellowship with other believers. The end result of the current mindset among Christians is that when one's orthodoxy does not coincide with one's particular faction, the only alternative, at least according to some, is to carve up the body of Christ and form other so-called loyal groups. This author (Dallas Burdette) was associated with one such group (seventeen years) in the early part of his ministry. The following remarks appeared on the signboard in front of the church building: "The loyal church meets here." In other words, there was not another faithful church in the entire city of Montgomery, AL, except this one small odd group.

The Gospel: The Message of the Cross

The thrust of the essay is not to deal with the negative statements by many sincere believers, but rather to develop the positive nature of the biblical meaning of the word *Gospel* and its implications in evangelistic outreach to the world at large. The Gospel is God's answer to the problem of evil in the world. Hopefully, this paper will touch those who profess Christianity as well as Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah and the Islamic followers of Mohammed (AD 570-629), many of whom fail to acknowledge the ethical standards as taught by Jesus and participate in terrorist activities. Christians, as well as all people, need to recapture the core of Christianity—the Cross of Jesus and His resurrection. These two facts constitute the very heart of the message of salvation for men and women. It is through the Cross that God makes known His holiness and His love simultaneously. Forgiveness of sins is easily gained in other religions, but not so in Christianity. In Christianity, forgiveness is concretized in an historical event, namely, the Incarnation. Humanity deserves punishment, not forgiveness. With the advent of Christ, one understands that forgiveness can only take place as a real divine act. Divine law requires that sin should receive its corresponding penalty from God. There is a gulf between God and humanity. Men and women cannot construct the bridge between themselves and God. H. H. Farmer's words are worth citing at length in order to drive home the point of forgiveness as costly for God:

The view that the divine forgiveness waits only upon penitence is sometimes criticized on the ground that it makes much forgiveness cheap and easy. The criticism cannot be admitted. On the contrary, it may be thought to rest on a rather cheap and easy and shallow view of sin and of its consequences in the human spirit. When you begin really to understand what sin is and what it does in and to the human person you begin to see that to bring a man to, and continually to renew in him, a really sincere and true penitence towards God is an infinitely difficult and costing task. It requires in fact, as I shall maintain, nothing less and nothing other than the total self-offering of the Saviour himself to God.^[2]

In order to bridge this gap, God revealed Himself in Christ. The revelation of God is seen on the Cross. Revelation means that God has come to human beings. For God to come to men and women, God had to condescend and self-empty Himself, as it were, to come close to His creatures. In other words, He had to divest Himself of deity, at least in His external manifestation—His humanity. The author of Hebrews expresses the humanity of Jesus this way:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that

by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for^f the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (**Hebrews 2:14-18**).

The Gospel deals with redemption. To say that God comes to humankind is to say that God comes to meet His creatures where they are. God had to come to the level of flesh in order to meet with men and women. It is only at the Cross that one sees fully what it is that separates one from God. It is at the Cross that one perceives that he or she is no longer separated from God. Guilt is too great to be removed by forgiveness that is just pure and simple, that is to say, no atonement or punishment for sin. Forgiveness took the doing and dying of Jesus who is God’s “mercy seat” for His grace toward sinners.

The Cross of Jesus: The Assurance of Divine Forgiveness

The Christian doctrine of forgiveness is based upon the fact of the atonement of Christ. The Personal Word (Jesus) comes from beyond the human sphere. Jesus is the Word from the other side, the Word from above. Jesus Himself constitutes the content of the Gospel. Jesus is of a different origin from His creatures; He is from above; his creatures are from below. Jesus told the religious leaders: “**You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world**” (**John 8:23**). The Christ who came is the Gospel. In the Gospels, the Cross of Jesus is conceived as the self-offering of God. Only God can make this sacrifice for the sins of the human race. He alone can expiate and cover sin as if it had never been. It is God Himself who takes upon Himself suffering in order to atone for the sins of His creatures. It is God who does it; it is God who suffers. The sacrifice that reconciles one to God is not one’s own act, but God’s. The Gospel of Jesus signifies the great revolution in the religious world—God became flesh and died for His creatures (**John 1:1-4**). God deals with evil in and through His Son Jesus. Emil Brunner focuses on the message of the Cross as the assurance of divine forgiveness:

Everything which tends to make us see the miracle of forgiveness as an incomprehensible miracle, as something which could never be expected, is good and necessary. God himself has provided the decisive safeguard. The cross of Jesus Christ is that event, within divine revelation, by which it is made impossible for us to take divine forgiveness lightly. This is the deepest reason why the message of the Cross is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling-block for the Jews. The message of the cross or rather the event itself is the divine medium by which forgiveness is given the full weight of the unheard-of, the incomprehensible and, seen from man’s side, the impossible. But this does not happen as it were by a divine rhetoric but by a divine inward necessity; for in the message of the cross both are revealed as one: divine holiness, which is not mocked, and divine love as the unconditional will to communion.^[3]

The Gospel is the Good News that God is with us. The Gospel is about Christ the Redeemer. As one approaches the word *Gospel*, it is not an inferior play upon words, so to

speaking, to picture the Gospel in terms of the Cross. The question that every individual must answer is: what is the Gospel of Redemption? In response to this query, one can state emphatically that it is the Cross of Jesus. The Gospel is not an ideology; it is not some secular world-view; it is not a philosophy of life, but rather, the Gospel is about God's act of salvation in and through Jesus. A negative question helps to focus in on the import of the Gospel. For instance, what is it that one cannot leave out without altering the character and meaning of the Gospel? The answer is, the Cross of Jesus. With this understanding of redemption, one can understand why Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians focused so much on the Cross.

The Cross: An Act of God

The Cross was an act of God. Paul writes with precision as he sets forth the heart of his message of salvation: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).^[4] The Cross of Christ is crucial, not only for the Gospel story, but for history itself. Is it any wonder that Paul writes: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). In the Cross, one observes that God tasted death for every person. The Cross is the decisive event in the history of the world. This happening in time changed the relations between God and the world. This occurrence was so powerful in the history of the world that one witnesses a change in the counting of years—from B.C to A.D. This change from B.C to A.D was no arbitrary device for numbering the years. This change confirms the conviction of the Christian community that the Cross of Jesus is the supreme reality of human existence. The Cross of the Messiah is the decisive center of the world. If not, where is it? If the Cross is not the crucial point of history, how can human history have any purpose or meaning?

If the Cross of Jesus did not happen, then the story of redemption, as related by Christians, is simply a fairytale and signifies nothing. If it is nothing more than a fable passed on from one generation to another, then the story as told in the Sacred Writings is ultimately meaningless. Is this story about Christ's crucifixion just simply one more fairytale in a catalogue of other stories passed on by storytellers? No! Since this story is true, it gives meaning to life itself. It is in Jesus that both men and women find an absolute and unalterable center of reference for importance to life. What does this central event in the history of humanity reveal? This crucifixion reveals two facts—both poles apart—that (1) Christ's death upon the Cross unfolds something that is altogether terrible and, at the same time, (2) reveals something that is altogether wonderful. One side of the Cross witnesses to the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the other side witnesses to the amazing wonder of God's forgiveness. As one reflects back upon the Cross, one sees the darkest point in the history of this world, and, at the same time, the most blinding light of glory—the antidote for the sins of mankind. There is a sense in which one can say that the victory of Satan is in reality his defeat.

One is confronted with the atrocities of the world on a daily basis. Yet, in the Cross, one is confronted with the real nature and meaning of evil. The Cross makes actual, as nothing else can do, the enormity of sin. In the Cross of Jesus, one observes sin acted out in all its naked blasphemy. The picture of sin is unutterably and heinously dark. Crucifixion, in and of itself, was common in the first century. Many individuals in the first century had had their naked flesh reduced to raw and bleeding strips. Not even the horsing

around of the soldiers for sport with Jesus is the critical point. Even though Jesus suffered excruciating agony through calculated torture—a torture of driving nails through His hands and feet into the crossbeam and the shaft—that still is not the significant and outstanding events of this death.

What made this crucifixion different from the other two crucified with Him on the same day? Thousands had been previously crucified. Not even the very fact that He was innocent is sufficient to elevate the Cross to the point found in the preaching of the apostles and the early church. The crucifixion of Christ is surrounded with the blood lust of the erratic crowd, the malicious cunning of priests, the professionally religious leaders, the disloyalty of one of His friends whose conscience was molted into silver, and another one of His close associates, in the face of danger, renounced with curses of any knowledge of the One called Christ. The grief Jesus suffered upon the Cross was human grief, something common to people. What is so significant about the Cross of Jesus? Why is it different? The answer lies in the identity of Jesus. He who died upon that Cross was Incarnate Righteousness and Love. He was God.

The Jews and Romans tortured and destroyed Him who is life eternal. Jesus was more than a man, and He knew that He was more. In His pre-incarnate state, He existed before the foundations of the earth came into being. Jesus Himself says, “**And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began**” (**John 17:5**). In the presence of Jesus, one felt the very presence of God. This One spoke as man never spoke. Jesus not only unveiled the failures of humanity, but He also revealed God’s forgiveness in and through Himself (**17:1-3**). He who died was Incarnate God. The Incarnate Word was nailed to the Cross for the sins of mankind. Since individuals live in a world that is opposed to God, one knows that Calvary was the fate of Jesus of Nazareth. The Cross of Jesus makes actual the real nature and meaning of evil. Why? The answer lies, as stated above, in that He who died there on Calvary was Incarnate Righteousness and Love. The attempt to destroy God is laid bare at the Cross. The Cross is not just an act of Pilate, but it is also an act of God. Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus, addresses many of those instrumental in the Crucifixion:

This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,^b put him to death by nailing him to the cross.²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (**Acts 2:23-24**).

In the Cross, Sin is manifested in all its depth. Sin is seen at its worse. It is seen for what it is; sin killed the Son of God. This act of defiance against God is the absolute high point of sin in all its rebelliousness. It is the lowest point of moral evil. One can say that this sin is more than just rebellion against God; it is the endeavor to annihilate God. Again, in this Cross, one witnesses the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and, at the same time, the amazing wonder of God’s love and forgiveness. Jesus, prior to His crucifixion, says, “**No one comes to the Father except through me**” (**John 14:6**). In Jesus, one sees God’s atoning and redeeming action. This strange man upon the Cross is not just some theological fiction but a historical fact that God was transforming the depraved in humanity into an occasion of his amazing love and costly wonder of His forgiveness. Paul expresses the necessity of

the offering of Jesus as a sacrifice this way:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,^a through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (**Romans 3:25-26**).

Death of Jesus: God's Atonement

Contrary to Islamic beliefs about the death of Christ, Paul explains why this had to occur. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, unfolds the mind of God in setting forth Jesus as atonement. It is in the same vein that John calls attention to this One who is called God's Lamb. Listen to John as he writes: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (**John 1:29**)! Today, there are over two billion followers of Christ throughout the world. In the crucifixion, one witnesses the passion of Christ in all its agony and bloody sweat as God's action in all of its mercy toward sinful humanity. This is the Gospel that has moved the world. A Gospel that does not exhilarate wonder and awe and amazement would not be a Gospel that would be worth believing or proclaiming to the world. The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) reveal that forgiveness is not resolved with a philosophical theory, but by the fact of the Cross. Both righteousness and grace are fused together in this one concrete fact of Jesus' Cross. In Jesus, one discovers that goodness and love are personified. As one reflects upon the events that transpired at the Cross, one can hardly fail to recall the words of the psalmist: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other" (**Psalms 85:10**).

Jesus, who is Goodness and Love personified, shows, through the Cross, God's grace in dealing redemptively with evil in the place where it was the most concrete, that is to say, in His sufferings and death. Once more, the Cross is something actual; it is holy love Incarnate. In this suffering, Jesus shows no trace of sentimentality or self-pity; His pity is for the world in bondage. Shortly before His crucifixion, he breaks forth with words of distress for the nation of Israel: "**Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children**" (**Luke 23:28**). Even on the Cross, one hears words of forgiveness: "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**" (**23:34**). Even though God gave His Son before the foundation of the world, nevertheless, Jesus laid down His life of His own free will:

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father (**John 10:18**).

Jesus explains to Nicodemus something about God's love for lost humanity:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of

God's one and only Son.¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God"^h (3:16-21).

The Wonder of Salvation

When one reflects upon these penetrating words of the Messiah, one wonders why the Way of salvation no longer radiates from the faces of the redeemed. Why is there so little love and warmth among God's children? One's prayer should be that God would make this Scripture sink deep into the hearts of His people so that there may be unity within the Christian community in order to convert the world. Christians owe this message of salvation to all nations. One's outreach concerning missionary zeal is a true thermometer for the warmth of the Christian life. When one is in Christ, one is in the light. When one is in darkness, one is away from Christ. Christians must wrap themselves in God's grace in and through Jesus. From the very beginning of the Christian community, the community was a missionary society (**Matthew 28:18-20**). The world itself must also wrap itself with God's grace in and through Jesus. Without Him, one cannot have peace with God and eternal life.

If peace is ever to be the norm for the world, Christians must reflect upon the words of God as he speaks through Isaiah concerning Christ, written seven hundred years before the event happened: "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (**Isaiah 49:6**). Isaiah does not leave a shadow of doubt as to His identity as he writes about the Suffering Servant and His crucifixion in **Isaiah 53**. In another Servant Song, Isaiah again, through the Holy Spirit, gives the words of God concerning the Servant of **Isaiah 53** with these words: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles" (**42:6**). Prophecy itself also vindicates the truthfulness of Christianity—that God became incarnate in order to redeem sinful humanity.

Jesus is the revealer of the divine truth and the redeemer from guilt and sin. Once more, it is in the Cross of Jesus that one witnesses God punishing sin and revealing His forgiveness. Nothing can press the love of God into the hearts of men and women as the death of the Savior. Why? It is there at Calvary that one sees what God's love takes upon Himself. His people hanged the Son of God upon a criminal's gallows. Yet, at the same time, one sees that this criminal act became a revelation of God's justice and love. Is it any wonder that Paul preached Christ and Him crucified? The Cross is something actual; it is Holy Love Incarnate. There is in this Cross a paradox—the forgiveness of God. Jesus is not a passive figure in this drama of sin and salvation, but rather, He is an Actor throughout the whole ordeal. Remember, as stated above, that Jesus says, "**The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.**"¹⁸ **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father"** (**John 10:18**). In this scenario of His final act for the salvation of the world, one observes Jesus moving from

Gethsemane to Calvary.

Jesus: “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me”

As one reflects upon this action of Christ, one still struggles to comprehend the measure of Christ’s suffering and fathom the depth of God’s counsel in this act of self-sacrifice, an action that staggers the imagination. Christians are still baffled with Jesus’ cry upon the Cross: “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**”^b There is no easy answer to these words. Is it possible that in this cry that Jesus identified Himself with sinners, and, thereby, staggered under the fact and burden of sin as only the Son of God could do? Is He saying “amen” on behalf of humanity to God’s judgment upon sin? Is there an answer to Jesus’ statement in the writings of Paul? Listen to Paul as he writes to the Corinthians: “God made him who had no sin to be sin^a for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Olive Wyon expresses her comments with penetrating insight: “The horror and the darkness which this involved are beyond our understanding. We can only look at him—consider him—and ask that we may see the hatefulness of sin, our own sins, and repent from the bottom of our hearts.”^[5]

In Jesus’ identity with fallen humanity, one witnesses Jesus staggering under the burden of sin as only the Son of God could do. This death of Jesus signified an AMEN on humanity’s behalf concerning God’s judgment upon sin. Christians still say “amen” to God’s judgment upon sin. Only Jesus could see and know the full impact of sin upon humanity—enmity against God, which enmity results in desolation and loss. Is this why Jesus cried: “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” How is it possible for the Son of God to feel abandoned? Surely, in this cry, one sees and hears the real suffering of Christ on the Cross. This cry is more than just the external pain of death and martyrdom and loneliness. Is it possible that in this “call” of Jesus from the Cross that one is consciously made aware of His divine commission to the human race for redemption? With this shout, one witnesses the Incarnation of God’s Son in reaching His final purpose—“It is finished” (John 19:30). God is too high and man is too deep in His sin to reach the goal of perfection, which God requires. Jesus is the Mediator between God and humanity. He suffered despair in order to spare sinful humanity from despair.

Since men and women cannot obtain perfection, or sinlessness, in their lives, God imputes His righteousness to those who place their faith in His Son. Individuals cannot reach the target that must be reached for reconciliation between God and the human race. No one has ever been able to love God with all his or her heart. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the record of how God comes down to men and women in the human sphere in order to bring life. To do this, His death upon the Cross was necessary to reach the objective of salvation for lost humanity. People want to climb their way to heaven; God, on the other hand, descends to earth in a human body. He descends to where? The answer is: the death on the Cross, which is a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, expresses Christ’s atonement this way:

Who, being in very nature^a God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature^b of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross

(Philippians 2:6-8)!

This death of Christ upon the Cross was necessary in order for Him to come completely into suffering humanity. His death could also be looked upon as a penal, or punishing, death. In other words, He suffered the punishing death for every person because of the unfaithfulness of men and women. If Jesus had not suffered, then every human being would experience this severe death, that is to say, a death in despair and separation from God. The rightful end of lost humanity is banishment from God and God forsakenness. If Christ had not died upon the Cross, the cry of everyone would be, “**My God, my God why have you forsaken me?**” In Jesus’ sacrifice, one can avoid this cry of despair. On the Cross, one sees this kind of despair from God’s Son as He calls out to the Father with the cry of loneliness and forsakenness. In His death, He cried and experienced this loneliness and forsakenness from God in order to prevent those who put their trust in Him from this tantalizing expression of grief: “**My God, my God why have you forsaken me?**”

Repetition of this concept is helpful in order to drive home this amazing act of grace for sinful humanity. There is a sense in which He Himself had to despair of God in order to prevent individuals from forsakenness who put their trust in His Son. Jesus died in order that every person who puts his or her hope in Jesus for salvation do not have to call, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” Emil Brunner captures the essence of this dilemma when he writes: “He had to despair of God for us so that we do not have to despair of God, just as he had to die the penal death so that we may become free of the punishment. He has taken all that upon himself so that we may become free of it”.^[6] J. S. Whale also gives insight into this most problematic cry:

What we do know is that He who had identified Himself with sinners to the uttermost, and was here staggering under the fact and burden of sin as only the sinless Son of God could do, was here saying Amen on behalf of humanity to the judgment of God upon Sin.^[7]

His death completes His identification with sinful humanity. Christ died in utter loneliness. Christianity does not shrink from the Cross. Two things are foremost in the Gospel—the Cross and the Resurrection. This is the Gospel that has moved the world. One cannot look at the Cross in isolation from the Resurrection. Both are indissolubly united. Nevertheless, these two factors are scandalous and offensive to the world at large. In spite of the fact that the world looks at these two historical events as scandalous and offensive, nevertheless, Christianity does not shrink from these two beliefs. Every Christian points to and insists upon the Cross and the Resurrection. Once more J. S. Whale captures the significance of the Cross in Christianity and the problem of evil:

Indeed, by facing evil, and facing it here, and by not belittling or ignoring it, Christianity has greatly deepened and intensified the age-long problem which evil raises. We haven’t seen the problem of sorrow and sin in all their inescapable horror until we have stood at the cross. The Church has never ceased to insist that the cross—to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness—is “crucial” for its faith. That is, it has always refused to explain suffering and sin away; it has looked physical evil and moral evil in the face as nothing else has done. The rivals of the Christian faith fail just where the

message of the cross is proclaimed.^[8]

The Cross knows about suffering; it knows that affliction is a horrifying actuality. One can hardly reflect upon the Cross without a consciousness of the words of Isaiah concerning the death of the Messiah. Listen to this prophet as he pinpoints the agony of the Messiah:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (**Isaiah 53:4-5**).

CONCLUSION

The Cross and Suffering

Jesus is God's answer to the problem of evil. Whenever one faces pain and suffering, one must look to Jesus "who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (**Hebrews 12:2-3**). The pain that Jesus bore upon Calvary gives one some insight about pain that enables one to bear grief. The Cross allows one to see sin in all its ugliness. In other words, the Cross is a mirror in which one sees his or her sin as one has never seen before. The Cross makes one see the real meaning of sin. One knows what sin is when one faces the Cross of Jesus. No believer can disassociate himself or herself from the scandal of the Cross. The Cross is the mightiest act of God in history. In the Cross, one witnesses God breaking into history from beyond history. God enters time in order to redeem His creation. The crucifixion witnesses a cosmic battle fought between good and evil. Not only is the Cross an outrageous fact of history, but it is also, at the same time, the triumphant act of God. At the foot of the Cross, one sees God using sin as an instrument of redemption. The Cross not only depicts the ultimate sin of humanity, but, it also exhibits God's deed of grace.

Without the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, there is not uniqueness in Christ, that is to say, there is no redemption and victory over death. Emil Brunner aptly stresses the centrality of the Gospel: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ, as Paul shows us in the briefest compass in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians, is a movement from God to Man."^[9] As one reads the Gospels, one observes that the Resurrection of Jesus is not an appendage to the Christian faith; it is the Christian faith. It is the Resurrection alone that explains the Gospel of God. At the Cross, God speaks His word concerning His answer to the problem of evil. A Gospel proclaimed that does not excite wonder is not worth believing or proclaiming. Even though the Cross is disgraceful to many, nevertheless, it is the paradox of all existence. What right has anyone to expect forgiveness of sins? It is only at the Cross of Jesus that one can expect forgiveness. This paradox of forgiveness is not resolved by any dialectical theory of knowledge, but by the Cross of Christ as it towers in triumph over sinfulness in humanity. Jesus, as He faced the sufferings of the Cross, did not reject this humiliation. On His way from Galilee to Jerusalem, He says, "But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed" (**Luke 12:50**)! His Cross is not only crucial in the scheme of redemption as reported in the Gospels, but for history itself.

As one reflects upon evil and suffering in the world, the words of George Washington are to the point about morality in an immoral world: “Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”^[10] Zacharias writes with precision about morality:

Reason and intuition are pointers to the need for morality, but it is only on the character of God that morality is based. Just as God cannot self-destruct because He is pure goodness, so in drawing from His character we can avoid the breakdown of our own lives and the destruction of our purpose. God provides the blueprint of what life was intended to be. He not only shows us in His commands what we must do, but in His person what it is to *be*. He not only shows us in His commands what we must do, but in His person what it is to *be*. He clothes us with dignity and guards the dignity of everyone, regardless of origin or creed. Freedom is given but tempered by mutual respect and justice.^[11]

How does God deal with evil and forgiveness? The answer is Jesus! J. S. Whale, in this same vein of evil and forgiveness, writes: “The Cross is something actual; it is Holy Love Incarnate embodying, beyond all doubt, this paradox of the forgiveness of God.”^[12] God is active and Christ is active in the scheme of redemption. Christ is not a passive victim in His death, but rather, He is an active participant all the way through this grueling death. One witnesses Jesus as He moves from Gethsemane to Calvary on behalf of humanity, suffering the judgment of God upon sin. It is in the Cross that one hears God’s word to the problem of evil in the world. At the Cross, one views the whole problem of human suffering and sin as it comes to a burning focus in all its hideousness. Just a brief reflection upon Calvary reveals the fate of the Prince of human life in a world of corruption. As one approaches the Cross, one stands in awe as one reflects upon the greatest moral evil in the universe—killing the Man of Sorrows. What is the Gospel of redemption? It is the Cross. What is God’s answer to the problem of evil in the world? It is Christ! If God destroyed evil, as some maintain that He should, God would have to alter the very nature of humanity. Freedom of will is both the glory and burden of men and women. This freedom of the will involves the ability to do good or evil. Without God, there could be no such thing as evil. For one to speak of God’s goodness, there must be the opposite. The words of Amos the prophet (760 BC) are appropriate concerning the distinction between good and evil: “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.”¹⁵ Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts (**Amos 5:14-15**). In conclusion, the words of Ravi Zacharias are worth citing: “We must choose between an amoral world and a world that acknowledges a moral basis for life itself, which can only be rooted in God.”^[13]

^[1] One who adheres to Islam is called a Muslim. The central doctrine of Islam is the absolute unity of God (Allah). The Islamic faith maintains that God, at several points in history, sent prophets, one of whom was Jesus. They do not deny that Jesus was born of a virgin and a spirit from God and His Word; nevertheless, they still maintain that Jesus was a created being, not begotten. Also His crucifixion was only apparent, not real. According to Islam, Mohammed was the last of the prophets.

a Or *you at the first*

^[2] H. H. Farmer, *The Word of Reconciliation: Christ's Saving Work in the Lives of Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 62.

f Or *and that he might turn aside God's wrath, taking away*

^[3] Emil Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity*, The Robertson Lectures (London: SCM Press, 1951), 81.

^[4] All Scripture citations are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, c1984), unless stated otherwise.

b Or *of those not having the law* (that is, Gentiles)

a 25Or *as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*

f Or *his only begotten Son*

g Or *God's only begotten Son*

h Some interpreters end the quotation after verse 15.

b Psalm 22:1

a Or *be a sin offering*

^[5] Olive Wyon, *Consider Him: Meditation on the Passion of our Lord* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 45-46.

a Or *in the form of*

b Or *the form*

^[6] Emil Brunner, *I Believe the Living God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 83. I am deeply indebted to Brunner for the genesis of my thoughts about this cry of Jesus from the Cross.

43. ^[7] J. S. Whale, *The Right to Believe* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938),

^[8] Ibid., 61-62.

^[9] Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934, 1952), 561.

^[10] Cited in Ravi Zacharias, *Light in the Shadow of Jihad: The Struggle for Truth* (Orlando, FL: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 31.

^[11] Ibid., 28.

^[12] J. S. Whale, *The Right to Believe*, 41.

^[13] Ravi Zacharias, *Light in the Shadow of Jihad*, 33.